

Peter Woodward: From boring to divine encounter

## From boring to divine encounter: Can we preach without the violence of certitude and hegemony?

Peter Woodward

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### Abstract

*“Preaching is boring,” is the expectation for most who sit in the pews Sunday after Sunday. The dominant paradigm for that preaching is “preaching the gospel” as the truth that listeners need to hear - a message delivered with certitude and directiveness. This presentation of the Good News of Jesus Christ has the marks of hegemony and violence visited on both listeners and the preacher. This paper explores an approach to preaching which eschews certitude and hegemony by providing a reflective and invitational approach; using five categories:*

*What is God doing?; What is the aim and intention of preaching; Preaching and the preacher; Preparation and Delivery; and Evaluation.*

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### Introduction

Imagine what it would be like if, every time you were a participant in a preaching event/drama, as preacher or listener, you came away knowing, positively or negatively, that life could never be the same again. It is my contention that preaching, which is a proclamation of God’s imaginative and alternate vision for creation and the community of faith, should invite preachers and listeners into the creativity, humility and vulnerability of divine encounter - seeking and living in God’s continued presence and action in the world. The alternative is to deliver a pseudo gospel which has limited viability in the lives of preachers and listeners.

This “high” expectation of preaching stands in stark contrast to a widely held view of “preaching” and “sermon” virtually as synonymous with “boring.”<sup>1</sup> My experience of growing up in a Christian home, attending church regularly and listening to sermons for more than 60 years confirms the descriptor “boring.” Out of this experience and a growing realisation that faith has to be a lived reality rather than a recitation of “ancient history”, I have developed a passion for preaching which has resulted in a strong desire to both preach and listen to sermons that breathe

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<sup>1</sup> I recall one faithful churchgoer’s response to the idea looking for more effective preaching as: “I wouldn’t know about that, because that is when I sleep!”

life and faith into heart and soul, in short, that are a divine encounter rather than boring and life denying.

It would be presumptive to imagine that I have answers to all the problems that preaching presents to preachers and to listeners; but I am confident that these five issues are key to any approach to preaching:

1. What is God doing?
2. What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?
3. Preaching and preacher;
4. Preparation and delivery; and
5. Evaluation.

These are not discrete variables, having inevitable overlaps and interrelatedness. Nevertheless, they are helpful ways of looking at God's mission – *missio deo* – through the ministry of preaching with the intention of avoiding certitude and hegemony.

### **What is God doing?**

*If preaching is a place where we meet Christ,  
then we must imagine that God is somehow present in this act.<sup>2</sup>*

Raewynne Whiteley firmly grounds her approach to preaching in her sacramental life. Her tentative approach expresses the humility, even vulnerability, of seeing preaching as an act of living faith – a genuine encounter with God – making it much more than an intellectual exercise, a display of public speaking, or an obligatory part of the ritual of a church service.

In contrast to the humility and searching of Whiteley's statement, we need to acknowledge or confess the idolatry so prevalent in our approach to God. Instead of knowing ourselves as made in God's image and therefore belonging to the mystery of creation and redemption (re-creation), we often seek to define, manage and control our reality through our attachments to the idols that are amenable to personal and group psyche. These idols include fundamentalism, bibliolatry, theological certitude, materialism in a prosperity gospel, propositional faith, "a ticket to heaven" faith, intellectualism and, conversely, anti-intellectualism. In a wide variety of expressions "believers" attempt to generate belief systems where "we know that we know that we are right" so

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<sup>2</sup> Raewynne J. Whiteley, *Steeped in the Holy. Preaching as Spiritual Practice*, Lanham 2008, 14.

that God can be accommodated into our theology and worship forms.<sup>3</sup> Though some would deny it, these are typically expressions of control. and hegemony

Through the Reformation and the Enlightenment in particular, we have inherited a virtual addiction to rationality, often expressed as objective truth and evidence-based practice. The advent of postmodernism has inexorably drawn us into the epistemological questions of the nature of language and truth. However, the servant, “rationality,” has become a demanding master that will not easily release us from the hegemonic notion that, when we have the *objective truth*, we are in control of the way in which knowledge is disseminated and received by others. Preaching delivered in this manner is inevitably an expression of certitude and hegemony which can be seen to be attractive; but is by its nature coercive.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to this certitude and hegemony, God reveals God’s self to us; but will not be subject to any facility of definition, management or control. In past generations we defined God with the “O’s” –omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. Brueggemann rightly criticises this view of God as unworkable: “it will not work [...] in Trinitarian terms because it is impossible that the Father of the three O’s would have sent such a compassionate, self-giving Son into the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Preachers must ask the question: “What is God doing?” to remain faithful to their calling as witnesses to the One, active and present. The question is both highly presumptuous and utterly necessary. It is presumptuous because we dare to imagine that we can have the intimacy with God that gives us access to God’s present activity. That assumption has led to some dangerous outcomes in the life of the church. Nevertheless, the invitation to listen to and wait on God is utterly necessary. Any other starting point for preaching, apart from seeking God’s purpose and love in ministry and preaching, means that we deliberately usurp God. In doing so we negate our exclusive allegiance to and complete dependence on the one who comes to us as the God of faithful love, and to use Brueggemann’s words

the God *artistically rendered*;

the God rich in *internal complexity*;

the God free in *dialogical externality*;

the God saturated with *fidelity and freedom*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, *Quest for the Grail*, New York 2016, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home. Preaching among Exiles*, Louisville 1997, 40.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church*, Minneapolis 2011, 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

My Protestant upbringing gave me an unhealthy distrust of anything Roman Catholic. I am now much more cognisant of the rich traditions that belong to all of us. Of interest in this context is the mystic tradition that calls us to know God intimately, always recognising that we are in the midst of mystery which is utterly benevolent and beyond the confines of the human mind. Paul R. Fagan, in his Doctor of Ministry thesis: “Towards a Spirituality of Preaching: the preacher as friend of God”<sup>7</sup> gives a good summary of the mystic expression of faith through the centuries in terms of friendship with God as a necessary component of the life and faith of the preacher.<sup>8</sup> Thus the question, “What is God doing?” becomes the quest for an intimacy with God which dares to express itself in terms of heart and soul and directs the preacher away from the temptation of certitude and control.

The importance of asking, “What is God doing?” can also be viewed through the lens of two-way theology – both top down and bottom up.<sup>9</sup> The preacher cannot preach without being attentive to the theology of the people. S/he must be attentive - carefully and lovingly - to the explicit and the implicit theology of the people of God to bear witness to God’s activity in their lives. Theological reflection requires ministry practitioners – preachers, ministers, pastors – to engage in critical and prayerful reflection seeking the faith and understanding of their own relationship with God as well as that of their faith community.<sup>10</sup> In this context the rich diversity of theologies and voices provides opportunity to enrich the processes of theological reflection and the practice of preaching.<sup>11</sup>

Two examples of the importance of asking: “What is God doing?” come from Adam Hamilton and Andy Stanley. Hamilton is the Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas whose mission, to be a church where the unchurched and those on the fringe can grow in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ determines the preaching.<sup>12</sup> Enacting this strong sense of mission has resulted in spectacular growth in the multi-campus congregation. Similarly, at Northpoint Church in Atlanta, Georgia, Senior Pastor Andy Stanley, together with a group of church members, determined that they would be a church “that

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<sup>7</sup> *Fagan, Paul R., C.P., Towards a Spirituality of Preaching. The Preacher as Friend of God, Doctor of Ministry Thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, Saint Louis 2012.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–44.

<sup>9</sup> The view of top down theology where “the expert” theologian imparts faith and theology to the faithful, also called trickle-down theology is not valid and does not work. See *Mary McClintock Fulkerton*, “Introduction,” in *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, Oxford 2007, 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Peter Woodward*, “Theological Reflection as a Key to Practical Theology,” *Australian Electronic Journal of Theology*, 22.2 (August 2015) 131–132.

<sup>11</sup> *Nicholas Thomas Wright*, *The New Testament and the People of God*, London 1995, 44–46; *David F. Ford*, *The Future of Christian Theology*, Chichester 2011, 8; *David J. Losse*, *Confessing Jesus Christ. Preaching in a Postmodern World*, Grand Rapids 2003, 59–60; *J. Wentzel van Huyssteen*, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, Grand Rapids 1997, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Adam Hamilton*, *Unleashing the Word. Preaching with Relevance, Purpose, and Passion*, Nashville 2003, Chapter 1.

unchurched men, women, and children love to attend.”<sup>13</sup> Again dramatic growth in attendance has occurred. The growth in these two churches – one liberal, the other conservative – is not a guarantee that they have “got it right”. However, their intention to discern their calling and mission, and then to plan, deliver ministry and preaching, and evaluate accordingly calls the church to ask, “What is God doing and where are we being led?”

In summary, the question, “What is God doing?” challenges any view of preaching as an exercise in rationality accompanied by certitude and hegemony; and in contrast seeks a relationship with God which is intimate, ready to enter the mystery of God, attentive to the theology and faith of all – “naïve” or “learned,” and filled with the passion of engaging in God’s purpose and mission.

### **What is the purpose, meaning and intent of preaching?**

Seen through the lens of white, western Christianity, from Constantine’s acceptance of Christianity and on through the centuries in a culture of Christendom, the dominant version of preaching has typically been an expression of power, certitude and hegemony.<sup>14</sup> This coercive approach has continued, and been reinforced, with the prominence of rational thinking in the Enlightenment. Sermons resulted from interpreting and determining the “real” meaning of the Scripture so that texts were explained and applied to the lives of listeners, whatever their status as attendees.<sup>15</sup> Allen describes two highly influential forms of this preaching.<sup>16</sup> First, the “university sermon” as developed by the Franciscans and Dominicans in the late Middle Ages with a propositional approach: “name the point or thesis at the beginning and break it into smaller didactic propositions for analysis” and application. Secondly, several centuries later the Puritan approach to preaching used the exposition of Scripture – “biblical exegesis, theological interpretation, moral exhortation.”

By the second half of the twentieth century white, western Christianity and the milieu in which it had grown were undergoing seismic cultural shifts. Postmodernism, the emergence of alternate theologies such as liberation and feminist, and increasing secularisation displacing the church from the “centre” of society are three important changes that challenge propositional and didactic preaching. New forms of proclamation are required unless the church is content to remain in a fossilised form of faith and worship.

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<sup>13</sup> *Andy Stanley*, *Deep and Wide. Creating Churches Unchurched People to Attend*, Grand Rapids 2012, 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Brueggemann* (note 4), 38–39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> *O. Wesley Allen, Jr.*, : *idem* (ed.), *The Renewed Homiletic*, Minneapolis 2010, 3.

The experience of the young Weary Dunlop gives a practical example from the 1920s:

In 1920 Ernie (later known as Weary) gained his Merit Certificate, ... and discarded his religion. He was 13. 'I decided this heaven and hell approach to life seemed a bit illogical. Saints, sinners, cardinals, popes – who really knew about these things? I'd better make up my own mind.'

[...] (The preaching) was fundamentalist Christianity [...] which threatened hellfire and brimstone [...]. Yet not even the fiercest efforts of these well-meaning prophets intimidate Ernie and the 'admirable but very rigid faith of my near-Calvinist parents' satisfied Weary neither spiritually nor intellectually.

After church, while the grown-ups gossiped round the door, the boys retreated to the banks of the billabong ... and Ernie would mimic whichever portion of the morning homily appealed most to his sense of the ridiculous. Thus, said Alan (his brother) 'purging our minds and souls of fears, making the whole thing a joke ending with hearty laughter.'<sup>17</sup>

For some the old certainties of biblical faith are the necessary and sufficient conditions for correct and vital preaching using a didactic approach. For example, Jackman<sup>18</sup> opposes the "virus" of post modernism and for Goldsworthy the approach has to be to:

the plan of salvation revealed in the Bible [...] consistent only with a God who alone is God [as] truth [which] is absolute and coherent because it is the truth of an absolute and coherent God. [Thus] Postmodernism and popular relativism are expressions of ideological atheism and must be resisted."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Carter, Duvall and Hays write in terms of connecting the sermon to the concept of biblical authority so that the sermon "follows closely the intended meaning of the biblical text" and draws its authority from that text using deliberate and precise approach to produce highly deductive sermons.<sup>20</sup>

While the thoroughness and passion of such an approach are obvious and can be argued to be laudable, it comes from a highly didactic mindset which reflects the hegemony and certitude of past generations. Mystery, openness and vulnerability are relegated to virtual irrelevance.<sup>21</sup> This didactic approach gives priority to correct theology and biblical interpretation – orthodoxy – over the praxis of love which is inevitably vulnerable, even ambiguous.<sup>22</sup> Any experience of a divine encounter must come through the "correct" approach to Scripture.

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<sup>17</sup> *Sue Ebury*, Weary. The Life of Sir Edward Dunlop, Ringwood, Vic 1995, 31–32. *Weary (Sir Edward) Dunlop* was one of the heroes of Australian life. Notable was his role as a doctor and prisoner of war on the infamous Burma Railway.

<sup>18</sup> *D. Jackman*, "Preaching that Connects 1. External Connections: Strategy and Resources," *Trinity Journal* 29NS 2008, 3–17.

<sup>19</sup> *Graeme Goldsworthy*, Teaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture. The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching, Grand Rapids 2000, 13.

<sup>20</sup> *T.G. Carter/J.S. Duvall/J.D. Hays*, Preaching God's Word – A Hands on Approach to Preparing, Developing and Delivering the Sermon, Grand Rapids 2005, 22.

<sup>21</sup> I have found reading "Acts" in the New Testament an evocative experience in terms of mystery, openness and vulnerability. The early church sees God as always present to the Christians with an immediacy than seems to be absent in the church as I currently experience it.

<sup>22</sup> Loving God and loving one's neighbor – as oneself can be fine; but loving enemies, especially those who disagree violently or are intractable in their viewpoint, and praying for their wellbeing are surely challenging.

The approach to preaching from Christendom and the Enlightenment demands correct interpretation. In so doing real intimacy with the text is avoided. Florence expresses this in terms of “badgering” the text, nagging it to death, or torturing a confession from it so that the meaning arrived at “may or may not bear any resemblance to the truth the text knows and really wants to tell us.”<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to this didactic preaching a non-didactic approach uses an invitational and non-coercive approach to witnessing to what God is doing through scripture, faith, knowledge and community. Consistent with a well-developed understanding of Theological Reflection,<sup>24</sup> it is much more important to engage in respectful interchange(s) in an attitude of loving kindness, vulnerability, humility, and readiness to give and receive critical reflection. The marks of non-didactic preaching must include love, vulnerability, humility, mystery, mutuality and invitation which contrast with the intensity of certitude and hegemony.

At this point it is appropriate to outline a variety of non-didactic approaches to preaching. In the “Preparation and Delivery” section details of the practice of these approaches are provided.

Anna Carter Florence sets out a non-didactic approach with preaching seen as “testimony.” Her study of women’s preaching in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, when women’s preaching was a marginal, even suspect, activity, describes their preaching as testimony to their living faith. This she combines with a strong call to “live in the text,” not for explanation, application, or proclamation of the text; but to experience life and faith in the text. Then the preacher must bear witness to “what has been seen and heard” as a testimony which will be typically evocative, even challenging:

Preachers in the testimony tradition do not go to the text for answers or explanations. They go to the text to live in it, to encounter, to get inside the passage itself and experience what the text is saying to them. The sermon is the aftermath of that encounter: we tell what we have seen and heard in the text, and what we believe. We offer our testimony.<sup>25</sup>

Robert C. Dykstra invites the preacher to play with the text; and, while the metaphor evokes the call to become as little children, this play has the deliberate intent of reaching into the depth of heart and mind to “discover” a sermon, or rather be discovered by the sermon. In his approach Dykstra sees the preacher being drawn into the text and the sermon out of attentiveness that calls for love and vulnerability much more than any accuracy or eloquence.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Anna Carter Florence*, “Put Away your Sword” in: Mike Graves (ed.), *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?* Louisville 2004, 98.

<sup>24</sup> *Woodward* (note 10), 131–132.

<sup>25</sup> *Anna Carter Florence*, *Preaching as Testimony*, Louisville 2007, 133.

<sup>26</sup> *Robert C. Dykstra*, *Discovering a Sermon*. Personal Pastoral Preaching, St. Louis 2001, 128.

John Addison Dally takes as his starting point the opening of the Gospels: “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’.”<sup>27</sup> He calls for a fresh reimagining of the kingdom with a strong emphasis on present lived reality; and for inviting the congregation to be participants who know themselves drawn together out of common allegiance to “being” and “becoming” people of faith. In particular he calls for an abandonment of the Exegesis/Illustration/Application approach to adopt a Proclamation/Implication/Invitation presentation. Rather than telling the congregation how to believe and act to maintain their faith and the church; the kingdom is proclaimed so that all are participants - preacher and listeners – and all are called to the life of the kingdom.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, John W. Wright calls for a conviction that the Christian life is about an “alternative community” or a “contrast society” inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Preaching must contrast the middle-class assumptions of a “saved” cohort with a community of faith shaped and challenged by the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>29</sup> This resonates with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s 1939 criticism of preaching at Riverside Church, New York as “respectable, self-indulgent, self-satisfied religious celebration” which contrasted with his passion for preaching which was thoroughly Christological.<sup>30</sup>

Gordon W. Lathrop’s approach contains three significant elements: firstly that preaching belongs in the life of the church and beyond – firstly, it is liturgical, exegetical and eschatological–prophetic; secondly, that it is intensely aware of the cultural milieu - as transcultural, contextual, countercultural and cross-cultural; and thirdly that it will call for the preacher’s (and the listener’s) heart and soul - requiring attention and imagination.<sup>31</sup> Lathrop maintains that preaching belongs firmly within the worshipping community to create and enable faith; and will be an occasion either for offence or for the meal of faith.<sup>32</sup>

The purpose of the texts is not for the assembly to imagine how things might have been in other times, but to encounter the biblical God, the God who comes now to this time with all biblical judgment and promise.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mark 1:14b–15 NRSV.

<sup>28</sup> *John Addison Dally*, *Choosing the Kingdom. Missional Preaching for the Household of God*, Herndon 2008, Chapter 4 and 113–117.

<sup>29</sup> *John W. Wright*, *Telling God’s Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation*, Downers Grove 2007, 10–11.

<sup>30</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, Edited and Translated, with Critical Commentary, by *Clyde E. Fant*, New York 1991, 17.

<sup>31</sup> *Gordon W. Lathrop*, *The Pastor: a Spirituality*, Minneapolis 2006, Chapter 2.

<sup>32</sup> He contrasts the response to Jesus’ words in Luke 4 at Nazareth, where the worshippers wanted to kill Jesus, with the response in Luke 24, where the shared meal in Emmaus was a crucial moment of revelation.

<sup>33</sup> *Lathrop* (note 31), 49.



Preaching must create the possibility that God's newness can invade, take root, and grow within the gathered community. Lathrop's approach resonates with Brueggemann's witness to God's "imaginative or" – seeking to imagine and give voice to God's new and yet to be fully revealed alternative to the closed and hegemonic cultures which so easily seduce with their certitude and promise of a closed reality.<sup>34</sup> Or to put this in terms of living the faith:

Preaching the human experience of God is not a matter of just knowing God in theory but rather of knowing God in the personal experience of human joy, suffering, of human life in our world today. The preacher names the grace, the face of God in the faith community.<sup>35</sup>

Both Hamilton and Stanley as preachers with their strong sense of mission to the *unchurched* may be seen as didactic in terms of content; but their approach to preaching requires an alternative mind-set. "Begin with the audience in mind – not your message."<sup>36</sup> The preaching will be imaginative, creative, collaborative, transformational, spiritual, not afraid of the hard questions, and enjoyable.<sup>37</sup>

In summary, non-didactic preaching does not seek to explain, apply or proclaim the text – the approach of certitude and hegemony; but rather through love, vulnerability, humility, mystery and invitation calls preacher and listener alike to live in the text and there to experience God's "imaginative or" still in process of being disclosed.

### Preaching and the preacher

The approach to preaching which is invitational and non-coercive requires that preachers are living expressions of the call to give testimony to God's "imaginative or":

The audience does not hear a sermon, they hear a person. "Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that" [quoting Bishop William A. Quale].

[...] Ultimately God is more interested in developing messengers than messages, and because the Holy Spirit confronts us primarily through the Bible, we must learn to listen before speaking of God.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Walter Brueggemann*, *The Word Militant. Preaching a Decentering Word*, Minneapolis 2007, 67.

<sup>35</sup> *Fagan* (note 7), 67.

<sup>36</sup> *Stanley* (note 13), 239–241.

<sup>37</sup> *Hamilton* (note 12), 86–97.

<sup>38</sup> *Haddon W. Robinson*, *Biblical Preaching. The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, Grand Rapids 2001, 26–27.

My ministry as an Army Chaplain gave me opportunity to reflect on the motivations I saw in myself and in other chaplains.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, I subsequently found that they also apply to ministry in general. Four primary motivations became clear:

- a. *Self-interest* – where chaplains seek enjoyment and self-satisfaction and may be attempting to avoid difficulties encountered in parish ministry;
- b. *Keeping the rules* – typically by ensuring that people believe the correct things and or follow denominational requirements;
- c. *Caring for people* – expressed in a strong pastoral care ministry; and
- d. *Response to what God is doing* – seeking to know and act consistently with God’s action in the lives of people and in the community. If the first three motivations – enjoyment, keeping the rules, and care for people – are not part of the experience of ministry, it inevitably becomes a perfunctory job rather than a vocation. However, the fourth motivation transforms every aspect of ministry, including preaching, placing the emphasis on God’s action and mission which is both liberating and highly challenging. It frees the preacher from the requirement to achieve since God is the source of all ministry. However, it challenges preachers and listeners to “Prophetic Imagination,” to use Brueggemann’s term: “The prophetic tradition [...] proclaims a God who is an active agent, who is manifestly present in the life of the world and is always up to the business of creating newness.”<sup>40</sup> A preacher cannot expect to preach a vital and living faith without a spirituality that is radically grounded in the activity – loving presence – of God, always beyond human definition and control and always summoning into God’s “imaginative or.”<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Fagan offers the insight that the art and craft of preaching are important; but of greater importance is the preacher’s calling from and relationship with God. This relationship must be expressive of a deep spirituality. Paul Fagan’s summary of spirituality is a fitting description for preachers:

- visionary* – we see reality in a new way through a spiritual lens;
- sacramental* – It involves the presence of God;
- relational* – living in this way demands sensitivity to the needs and gifts of others; and

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Woodward, “Spirituality for Army Chaplains” (unpublished, 1995); cf. also *idem* (note 10), 130.

<sup>40</sup> John M. Buchanan, “Foreword” in Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination. Preaching an Emancipating Word*, Minneapolis 2012, xiii.

<sup>41</sup> Brueggemann, *ibid.*, 4.

*transformational* – It puts us in touch with the presence of the Spirit that heals, reconciles, renews, bestows peace, sustains hope and brings joy.<sup>42</sup>

Fagan also describes this relationship as “friendship with God;” having the qualities of benevolence, mutuality, becoming another self<sup>43</sup> and accompaniment. Friendship with God thus creates a relationship where God gives life – fullness of life – to the preacher and to the community and generates the assurance of God’s grace active in contemporary human life.<sup>44</sup>

This relationship with God carries with it a critical sense of being alternative to the dominant culture. Brueggemann draws from the Old Testament prophets the calling to courageously relinquish the seductions of contemporary culture and to announce the newness that a faithful and loving God is yet creating.<sup>45</sup>

In this discussion of “Preaching and the Preacher” it is important to consider the “voice” of the preacher – hegemonic or invitational. Dykstra provides an analysis of the reasons for boring preaching using insights gained from psychology. Seminarians and seasoned preachers alike sometimes comment on the tension between their ministries of preaching and pastoral care, rightly noting that these two tasks require seemingly contradictory ways of communicating with their parishioners so that the concept of “pastoral preaching” appears little more than an oxymoron.<sup>46</sup> Pastors and preachers have learned to perform according to the expectations of the church – both parishioners and church authorities – and their own idealised understanding of ministry. Ministry determined by the expectations of others easily creates a contrived, even controlled, approach. Preachers can be significantly out of touch with the forceful issues of their lives, whether those issues are serious or apparently trivial or even embarrassing. In this dislocation preaching lacks authenticity as the preacher attempts to deliver an “expected” role and not the vitality and reality of their own genuine and personal voice.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Eduardo Samaneigo asks the question of: “Whose voice?” Is it a voice of limited relevance from times past; or is it a voice bearing the assumed authority of “another;” or is it the preacher’s “own voice” which comes with the

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<sup>42</sup> Fagan (note 7), 116–117.

<sup>43</sup> “Becoming another self” may seem strange at first sight. The incarnation is surely the ultimate expression of God’s becoming another self for the sake of humanity. Additionally, Paul expresses it as: “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1Cor 9:22b NRSV); and “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20a NRSV)

<sup>44</sup> Fagan (note 7), 72–73.

<sup>45</sup> Brueggemann (note 40), 41.

<sup>46</sup> Dykstra (note 26), 5

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 4; Rohr (note 3), 58–59.

congruence of personal experience and depth of inner self and is more likely to convey a lived reality.<sup>48</sup>

In this vein I have concluded that in preaching: “We only ever tell our own story,” or put it another way, “When we preach, we preach the Gospel according to – *here add you own name.*” In fact, it is the only gospel that we can offer. As Taylor puts this reality:

Every word I choose, every image, every rise in my voice reveals my involvement in the message. That is why I have never understood preachers who claim to “stay out of” their sermons, preaching the word of God and the word of God alone. It is not possible, but there is no reason why it should be.<sup>49</sup>

In consequence preachers need to regularly, both formally and informally, undertake critical reflection of their own story to carefully examine their own expression of the Gospel, their biblical and spiritual foundations, and the consequences of those beliefs. Engagement with a Spiritual Director and or Professional Supervision is a vital part of preaching ministry to maintain an approach which avoids the pitfalls of a coercive faith.

## Preparation and Delivery

Preparation and delivery are naturally as individual as each preacher. In this section we will look at a range of approaches which seek the humility and vulnerability that avoid coercive preaching.

Every preacher has a different routine for preparing a sermon. My own begins with a long sitting spell with an open Bible on my lap, as I read and read the text. What I am hunting for is God in it, God for me and for my congregation at this particular moment in time. [...] I am hoping for a moment of revelation I can share with those who will listen to me and I am jittery, because I never know what it may show me. I am not in control of the process. It is a process of discovery, in which I run the charged rod of God’s word over the body of my own experience, and wait to see where the sparks will fly.<sup>50</sup>

Taylor’s description indicates that preparation is both intentional and serendipitous. She engages the text; but in a manner that allows it to speak to her and to listeners. Because they are good representatives of this process of discovery and the vulnerability that accompanies it, I give particular attention to Florence’s and Dykstra’s approaches, together with shorter reference to Brueggemann and Lathrop. Each offers opportunity for preachers to work out their own method of discovering a sermon and of being discovered by a sermon in the quest for a delivery which avoids the violence of certitude and hegemony.

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<sup>48</sup> Eduardo A. Samaneigo, *SJ*, If you preach it, they will come, San Jose 2006, 15–16.

<sup>49</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cambridge 1993, 84.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–86.

Florence engages in a three-part process: “Attending: What do you see?”; “Describing: What do you believe”; and “Testifying: What are you going to say?”<sup>51</sup>

Attending is a deliberate discipline, especially for the sacred text, requiring openness, even a “blessed idleness,” which prefers receptivity and paradox rather than closure and absolutes.<sup>52</sup> Florence offers a range, fourteen in all, of exercises, not as a formulaic approach; but giving the opportunity of using at least three of them either individually or in group settings. The intention is for the preacher to be immersed in the text using their observations and imagination, and even taking risks – being pushed – in the experience of living in the text through attending to it.<sup>53</sup>

Describing moves from giving deliberate and creative attention to the text to a similar range of exercises for describing what has been *seen and heard* during the immersion in the text. This describing, for which she recommends a large sketch pad to enable an expansive imagination that is not limited by a keyboard and screen, is the means of stating what is believed from this experience of living in the text. This can take the preacher into the space of imagining a sermon that might be delivered if there were no limitations or hindrances of politics or personalities.<sup>54</sup>

Testifying moves to the stage where preaching as testimony can take place, but Florence adds, not without an enormous challenge to the preacher. To testify to that which has been seen and heard in the text the preacher must face for themselves and for their listeners all the possibilities of personal crucifixion and resurrection; and there are many systemic constraints which would divert preachers and listeners away from knowing the life changing reality of the gospel. However, when the preacher knows and acts on their calling of genuine love, the preaching will share the interpretative space with others even when that challenges fixed or sentimentalised views of religion.<sup>55</sup>

Testimony comes with a cost, for us and for our listeners, and this is the place where we decide if we are willing to pay it. And the matter is complicated, immensely so, because we are preaching to people we love. We do not want to *correct* them. We want to *liberate* them through the power of the Word we meet in the text. We want to give them hope, not hurt, for a future that liberated and redeems.<sup>56</sup>

The challenge of Florence’s approach to preparation and delivery is to be able to move forward believing that in living in the text we will receive a testimony which is God’s word for that moment delivered with invitation rather than certitude and hegemony.

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<sup>51</sup> *Carter Florence* (note 25). These are the three major subsections of Chapter 7, “The Wide Awake Sermon”.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–143.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 146–150.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 150–154.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 151. *Florence’s* challenge to love listeners came as a moment of “strange awareness” as I could not recall anywhere in training and formation being instructed to love the congregation.

Dykstra, as indicated above, sees preaching as the preacher both discovering and being discovered by a sermon. This discovery brings both preacher and listeners the challenge to search any preconceptions, usually enshrined in orthodoxy and coercive propositions, and to enter the ambiguities that can give them a deeper faith:

An orthodox sermon, which I take to include any sermon that expresses what the preacher and listening congregation already know or, worse, what they are supposed to know and believe and that thereby moves to a predictable conclusion, [it] is [...] simply another form of pre-figuring [assuming that there is nothing of newness or revelation] and [is] therefore, perverse.

[...] ironically, a sermon teetering on the edge of so-called heresy may actually come closer to an authentic witness to a personal, vital, complex faith and doubt.<sup>57</sup>

His preparation for preaching is to encounter in a creative way the affirmations, ambiguities and dissonances of the text, of life and of the liturgical situation; and this activity he calls playing with the text.

Firstly, he sets aside up to four hours to allow the text to be evocative – to write down whatever comes to mind – through his own reading and rereading. This process produces all manner of associations: some trivial, some embarrassing, some creative, all of them accepted in this part of preparation. This does not become the sermon; but becomes the seedbed out of which a sermon might grow.<sup>58</sup> Next he moves to about two hours of a similar exercise with his own life – a point of interest or incident – that he “plays” with, somewhat like Florence’s blessed idleness in “attending,” making it a virtual catalyst in the sermon process.<sup>59</sup> This is followed by “playing” with other resources, typically commentaries, to engage both their familiarity and their strangeness and to reveal the more intricate and complex issues that may be hidden to the “naked eye.”<sup>60</sup>

Finally, in “Playing with Fire”<sup>61</sup> Dykstra reaches the point of writing a sermon where he sees the most important task as “getting out of the way” and permitting the thoughts and insights generated, especially the dissonant ones, to come together in a way that seems independent of the preacher, a virtually serendipitous occasion:

A sermon’s coherence seems to emerge quite removed from, and not infrequently contrary to, the preacher’s own intentions ...

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<sup>57</sup> *Dykstra* (note 26), 88.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 1: “Playing with the Text.”

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 2: “Playing Witness to Life.”

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3: “Playing with Strangers.”

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 4: “Playing with Fire.”

Although I cannot fully explain it and though it remains for me almost always disconcerting, so frequently have I experienced what may best be described as being written *by* a sermon even while I am writing it that I now simply attempt to respect the sermon's own insistent claims on me.<sup>62</sup>

In a similar manner to Florence Dykstra points to a faith that the Word of God will be known and preached invitationally, expecting new, but not coercive, expressions of the life of faith.

Brueggemann's studies of the Hebrew scriptures means that his approach to preaching focusses on the text; but, not to produce its definitive meaning, rather to hear God's newness:

Rightly understood, the occasion of preaching requires both preacher and listening assembly to suspend many assumptions and to entertain the possibility that there is indeed a word other than our own, a word that comes from outside our closed systems of reality. In the word other than our own, the world is re-characterized, re-narrated, and re-described, shown to be other than what we thought when we entered the meeting.<sup>63</sup>

Brueggemann is, thankfully, very aware that many, even most, preachers are caught in the busy schedules of demanding pastorates and proposes a five-step approach to the text to elicit its deeper and potentially alternate meaning:

1. Undertake a rhetorical study of the text to examine the structure of the words in the text.
2. A word study follows "to focus on the freight carried by particular words" and with attention to "cross references" in the Scriptures.
3. After this exploration examine the vested interests in the text and their relationship to contemporary vested interest in the lives of preacher and congregation.
4. Consider the text "as if it were the only text we have" so that a "radical nonfoundationalist" interpretation is possible without "reference to protective universals."
5. Then in a final step look at the text in the context of the wide scope of scripture and of ecclesial traditions.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, the preacher is enabled to recognise and deliver God's "imaginative or" knowing that preachers and congregations are always tempted to look for a definitive or coercive pronouncement: "Anyone who imagines that he or she is a benign or innocent preacher of the text is engaged in self deception."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>63</sup> Brueggemann (note 34), 13.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 77–78. Brueggemann writes of three-step process; but then goes on to add the additional two stages (steps) in the sermon preparation.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 87. From my Spiritual Director: we can both cry and laugh about our personal ego – cry, because of the way it intrudes in ministry; and laugh, because it is always present; but that awareness gives less power to personal ego in preparation and delivery.

Lathrop gives emphasis to “attentiveness,” that is, to feeling the impact of the strangeness of text, to the pastoral situation, to the context, and to the cross-cultural import. His preparation method is instructive and challenging. He begins the week reading the texts to get them in his mind; and during the week gives attention to life, to mystery, to people, to the world in finite detail and on a global scale, and to his imagination to encompass possibilities of difference and closeness evoked by the text. On the day prior to preaching the text is given deliberate and careful consideration as well as attention being directed to the Eucharist – the central themes of the faith narratives. His method reads like a creative, almost frightening, adventure which he knows will not suit everyone – each must find their own method of articulating what the Eucharist embodies: “In the power of the Spirit, here is the gift of Christ that you may live. You are free to this life with the wretched and the poor.”<sup>66</sup>

Lathrop’s advice that each must find their own method (and giftedness) in preaching resonates with the vital challenge of a non-didactic approach. God’s invitation to know and respond to an “imaginative or,” always in process of being made present, is confronting to those for whom preaching requires a didactic, even formulaic, approach; but witnessing to God’s ongoing self-revelation and relationship with humankind demands humility and openness which avoid certitude and hegemony:

There is no such thing as infallibility or inerrancy; there are no universal truths for us to own or access at will. There are only fleeting glimpses of the truth we see and confess in Jesus Christ, the truth, that encounters us in our concrete human experience, by the grace of God.<sup>67</sup>

## Evaluation

Evaluation is critically important in all forms of ministry. In the context of the thesis presented here evaluation examines the quality of preaching against non-coercive faith. As with any form of Theological Reflection, there will be one or more steps of critical reflection and evaluation. For preaching, the preacher and listeners, the occasion and context, the preparation and delivery, the theology and liturgy, and the responses will all be carefully, lovingly, extensively and prayerfully examined.<sup>68</sup> The resulting evaluation should always be delivered with care and humility such that offence is neither given nor received; and positive outcomes are optimised.<sup>69</sup>

For some evaluating preaching may feel like the discomfort of preaching classes experienced in their theological education. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge four important aspects of

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<sup>66</sup> *Gordon W. Lathrop* (note 31), 60.

<sup>67</sup> *Carter Florence* (note 25), 65

<sup>68</sup> *Woodward* (note 10), 138.

<sup>69</sup> *Mark Dever/Greg Gilbert*, *Preach. Theology meets Practice*, Nashville 2012, 110.



evaluating preaching. Firstly, virtually no one leaves a preaching experience without personally, or in groups, assessing the quality and effectiveness of the worship and of the sermon in particular.<sup>70</sup> Secondly, when improvement in effectiveness is accepted and desired, evaluation is a necessary part of the process. Thirdly, because the preacher is performing in public, the risks of vulnerability and denial are always present and the need for a caring approach is reiterated. Fourthly, being intentional in evaluating preaching requires a commitment to a culture of change avoiding the typical default: “We’ve always done it this way.”

Where the vision and mission of the congregation and preacher include the desire for improvements, including assessment and evaluation, there will be the readiness to tackle the challenging questions and move forward.<sup>71</sup> The alternative is hoping for change, but being reluctant to face the necessary accountability; and allowing such inertia to determine the culture.<sup>72</sup> In consequence, the change of culture required will include initial “training” and even hours of debate by leadership in determining strategy.

Chadwick and Tovey offer suggested settings for review and evaluation of preaching including:

1. supervision by a specialist supervisor or peers,
2. consultancy with experienced preacher(s),
3. feedback from peers and or congregation;
4. learning partnerships; and
5. journaling to review one’s preaching.<sup>73</sup>

The preacher desiring greater effectiveness will employ at least two of these techniques.

The praxis employed in evaluation sessions is critically important. Dever and Gilbert provide a good outline of evaluation strategy. They indicate four key competencies:<sup>74</sup>

1. Giving Godly criticism:
  - offered in the context of love, appreciation and encouragement;
  - addressing specific issues;
  - offering positive alternatives as part of negative assessments;
  - given gently and firmly, avoiding any grandstanding; and

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<sup>70</sup> “Roast parson” for Sunday lunch is an expression from yesteryear; and see the description of *Weary Dunlop* above (note 17).

<sup>71</sup> *Stanley* (note 13), 302–305.

<sup>72</sup> Members of Alcoholics Anonymous inform me: The definition of insanity is to continue doing the same thing and to expect change.

<sup>73</sup> *Charles Chadwick/Phillip Tovey*, *Developing Reflective Practice for Preachers*, Cambridge, UK 2001, 12–14.

<sup>74</sup> *Mark Dever & Greg Gilbert* (note 69), 133–139. Some might criticise Chadwick and Tovey’s use of the word “Godly;” but it serves as a reminder that not only should preaching seek a divine encounter, but that evaluation should continue with that intention.

- aimed simply at helping.
2. Receiving Godly criticism:
    - requiring appropriate vulnerability;
    - desiring growth and improvement; and
    - in an atmosphere of trust and supportive community.
  3. Giving Godly encouragement:
    - which is realistic, neither understated nor overstated; and
    - addressing the impact on the heart and mind.
  4. Receiving Godly encouragement:
    - acknowledging the gift and the giftedness;
    - always in thankfulness; and
    - with grace and humility.

Andre Resner gives an interesting perspective on evaluation in that one of the pleasing outcomes of his Seminary course on the evaluation of preaching is that students who have taken his course are better prepared to move into a homiletics course to learn the art and skill of preaching.<sup>75</sup> Presumably they are then grounded in the concept of evaluation. He provides 21 questions which comprehensively address the intention, language, theology, scripture and outcome of preaching so that preacher and listeners can ask themselves: “What change in faith and action, individually and corporately, does the sermon invite; and how will we pursue that change?”

Evaluation as a strategy for improvement and accountability is essential, even if it involves risk. Preachers desirous of presenting faith which is invitational and avoids the traps of certitude and hegemony will seek ways to enter an accountability and evaluation program.

## Conclusion

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<sup>75</sup> *Andre Resner*, “No Preacher Left Behind: A new Prerequisite for the Introductory Preaching Course,” *Teaching Theology and Religion*, Volume 13, Issue 4, 2010, 339 – 349.

While the typical view both inside the church and beyond is that preaching is boring, more effective preaching is not an unrealistic goal. This requires a careful examination of the underpinning assumptions and practices of preaching as expressed by Florence and Dykstra:

preaching will never change without new theologies of proclamation.<sup>76</sup>

Trying to make everything fit into a set dogma won't work. There's no such thing as a central dogma into which everything will fit.<sup>77</sup>

Some will continue to argue for didactic preaching which sets forth the timeless truth of God as revealed in the scripture; but they risk the “violence” of certitude and hegemony that bespeak an imperialist church where correctness is prioritised over the praxis of love.

Preaching requires critical analysis and reflection if we are seeking greater effectiveness and this paper has done this using the headings:

1. What is God doing?
2. What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?
3. Preaching and preacher;
4. Preparation and delivery; and
5. Evaluation.

This provides a cogent and effective of approach to vulnerable, invitational and deeply reflective testimony to God's “imaginative or.” Preachers can be encouraged and enabled to deliver a proclamation which speaks to the heart and soul of both preacher and listener as a non-coercive faith.

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<sup>76</sup> *Anna Carter Florence* (note 25), 103. Italics as in the text.

<sup>77</sup> *Dykstra* (note 26), 82 quoting *Barbara McClintock*, Nobel Prize winning microbiologist in *Evelyn Fox Keller*, *A Feeling for the Organism. The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock*, New York 1983, Chapter 2 “The Capacity to be Alone”, 179.